

Images of Islam in Taiwan: From Chinese Islam to Global Islam

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Abstract

When the congregational prayer (*salat al-jama'ah*) takes place in Taipei Grand Mosque every Friday, the prayer hall is always overcrowded with Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including local Chinese (Hui) Muslim, Arabs, Turks, Africans, Malaysians and Indonesians. Taipei Grand Mosque looks like a mini global village. Muslims from different backgrounds and areas meet each other and exchange ideas after the congregational prayer. However, in the 1970s, there was a different image of Islam in Taiwan. Only Chinese Muslims were included in the congregation. The first generation of Chinese Muslims (around 20 to 50 thousand people) arrived in Taiwan under the national government in 1949 and early 1950s when the communist party took over China. These Chinese Muslims showed distinctive features of 'Chinese Islam' in Taiwan. The elites among these Chinese Muslims even played a leading role in the revival of Islam in China during the 1930s and 1940s. When they settled in Taiwan, they resumed work serving mass Chinese Muslims in Taiwan as they did the same in China, such as by constructing mosques, building Muslim cemeteries and dispatching Muslim students to the Middle Eastern countries. However, with the passage of the time, their work on the revival of Islam seems to have been unsuccessful. The population of Chinese Muslims stagnated and even declined in the 1980s. Instead, with the open policy for drawing in foreign workers and students by the government in Taiwan during the 1990s, foreign Muslims from various countries began to appear in Taiwan, exhibiting another image of Islam to the public. Nowadays, Chinese Muslims seems to be an invisible community in Taiwan as they and their descendants have become outnumbered by foreign Muslims. This paper aims to describe and analyse the paradigm shift in images of Islam in Taiwan over a half century.

Keywords: Islam; Hui Muslim; Taiwan; open policy; foreign Muslim

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Introduction

In general, the public in Taiwan derive an image of Islam mainly from news coverage on violence within Muslim countries in the Middle East or the long-term Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Islam seems to have a very negative image in the public eye, exacerbated when ISIS declared establishment of a caliphate in June 2014 and killed westerners, Shia Muslims, Yazidis, and Arab Christians in the name of Islam. However, an alternative to the narrative presented in the media, people can derive a different image of Islam through interactions with the 300,000 Muslims living and studying in Taiwan today. Muslims in Taiwan are multi-ethnic and multi-national, including local Muslims (descendants of Chinese Muslims) and foreign Muslims from diverse areas such as the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is common to see Muslim women who wear headscarves on the streets, and Muslims gather together to celebrate Islamic festivals in public. But the presence of Muslims in public remains unfamiliar to many Taiwanese.

Currently the topic of Muslims in Taiwan is not well researched. To fill the gap, firstly, this paper aims to present an overall picture of Muslims in Taiwan today. It then presents a brief history of